DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 251 253 RC 014 806

AUTHOR Jess, James D.
TITLE Rural Education 1984: Issues and Impacting Forces. A Local Perspective.
PUB DATE 28 Jun 84
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the National Conference on Building Partnerships for Quality Education in Rural America (Washington, DC, June 28, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Bias; *Community Involvement; *Consolidated Schools; *Educational Equity (Finance); Elementary Secondary Education; Government School Relationship; Needs Assessment; Personnel Needs; *Policy Formation; Political Influences; *Political Issues; Position Papers; Resource Allocation; Rural Education; *Rural Schools; Rural Urban Differences; School Business Relationship; School Policy; Small Schools
IDENTIFIERS Department of Education; Goal Setting; Partnerships; *Rural Education Rural Family Ed Policy for the 80s

ABSTRACT

Although rural America and rural education have a traditional heritage of diversity, collectively rural schools share several unique features. Most rural school districts are small, they are sparsely populated, they are likely to be isolated from any major urban center, and they are both an extension and a reflection of the community they serve. Because the school is the central focus of a rural community, it generates a great deal of support, involvement, and pride from members of the community. However, consolidation efforts centered around the "bigger is better" concept weakened both rural communities and the small schools integral to them. Eventual recognition of years of rural school neglect has taken the form of the Department of Education's "Rural Education and Rural Family Education Policy for the 80's," which assures to rural education its equitable share of resources. Yet to be corrected are antirural biases which unfavorably compare rural schools to urban schools, policies which encourage consolidation at the sacrifice of small school advantages, and financing and staffing inequities. The building of useful partnerships between business/industry and rural education will help to rectify resource inequities. (MM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED251253

RURAL EDUCATION 1984: ISSUES AND IMPACTING FORCES

A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

By

James D. Jess

President Rural Education Association

Superintendent CAL Community School, Latimer, Iowa

June 28, 1984

National Conference on

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS FOR QUALITY EDUCATION IN RURAL AMERICA

The United States Department of Education

Washington, D.C.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

James D. Jess

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

RC014806

Over one fourth of America's school age youngsters are educated in two thirds of our nation's public school systems that are located in areas described as rural. These school systems serve youngsters who live in the open countryside and in communities with fewer than 2,500 people. They are found in remote fishing villages off the coast of Maine; in coal company towns in Appalachia, in and around Nebraska's farming communities; in the Delta counties in Mississippi; in Colorado's recreation towns nestled in the Rocky Mountains; on the Indian reservations in South Dakota; in migrant settlements in Texas, in communities surrounded by vineyards in northern California; in tiny native villages in Alaska and at all points in between. Rural schools come in all shapes and sizes--from a one room, one teacher school serving three children on a single ranch in Wyoming to a large centralized consolidated school serving the youngsters of an entire county in West Virginia. Rural America and rural education has a traditional heritage of pluralism which makes sweeping generalizations about either difficult to make.

Despite their great diversity, collectively rural schools share some unique commonalities. First, most rural school districts are small in size. Nearly 75 percent (11,837) of our nation's 15,641 school districts enroll fewer than 2,500 students; over half (8,362) enroll fewer than 1,000 students; and over one fourth (4,223) enroll fewer than 300 students. Second, rural school districts are sparsely populated with 10 to 50 persons per square mile and many districts with populations of less than 10 persons per square mile. Third, rural school districts are likely to be isolated a great distance from any major urban center. And fourth, the traditional small rural school district is an extension as well as a reflection of the community it serves. It is often difficult to determine where education ends and community life begins in rural America because of the integration and interdependency that exist between the

rural school and its community. The school is seen as a community responsibility and likewise the community is seen as a school responsibility. The school facility serves as a center for everything that goes on in a rural community whether it be educational, recreational, or cultural for both the young as well as the old. Because the school is the central focus of a rural community, it generates a great deal of support, involvement and pride from parents and other members of the community. The closeness that exists in the relationships among students, staff, parents and other members of the community is difficult to match in a non rural setting. Because of this closeness, decisions affecting the school are shared by many and everyone feels that they have some degree of control over what happens in their school district.

The impacting forces of small size, population sparsity, isolation and school/community interaction in rural education are the unique features that have provided rural schools with their greatest strengths and at the same time have caused them their greatest difficulties, especially from impacting forces outside their local communities.

Twenty-five years ago rural America had nearly three times as many school districts as it has today. That was before James Conant published his study calling on educators to establish comprehensive high schools and eliminating districts that were too small to offer such schools. Today researchers are saying that the "bigger is better" adage is nothing but myth and that Conant's expected benefits from larger schools haven't occurred. James Coleman who has been studying the issue contends large schools are more likely to encounter discipline problems and that size also has strong effects on participation levels. John Goodlad has found in his work that smaller schools are consistently more satisfying for students and the community. And finally, Diane Ravitch comments in her book The Troubled Crusader that "Bigness meant impersonality, bureaucratization, diminished contact between faculty and

students, formalization of relationships among colleagues, and a weakening of the bonds of community." Those of us living and working in rural America have been saying these things for years, but unfortunately what we had to say often fell on deaf ears as policy makers at state and national levels worked to urbanize our American educational system regardless of where the schools were located. As Jonathan Sher so eloquently put it in his book Education in Rural America: A Reassessment of Conventional Wisdom, "the consolidation of America's rural schools was something that was done to rural communities rather than for them." For nearly three decades an over emphasis on consolidation as a cure-all for improving education in rural America stifled the creative thinking of many policy makers at the state and national levels and practitioners at the local level. The antirural bias that was built into state and national policy decisions for so many years became such a natural phenomenon that most people argued that it didn't exist.

A giant step to correct years of rural school neglect was taken last August when Secretary Bell signed the Department of Education's Rural Education and Rural Family Education Policy for the 80's. As stated in the policy, those of us who are rural educators "Ask no more than 'equity' in our attempts to work within the Federal and State education structures to assure rural and small town youth and adults equal educational opportunities." The Federal Policy assures that "rural education shall receive an equitable share of the information, services, assistance and funds available from and through the Department of Education and its programs."

Now that a rural education policy has been officially adopted at the federal level, it is equally important that rural education policies are formulated and adopted in each state government. Many of the issues that have stood in the way of rural school improvement efforts in the past remain

today and they need to be given appropriate attention at all levels of government--whether it be at the federal, state or local level. During my limited time this morning, I would like to focus your attention on five issues that I feel need to be addressed.

First, where antirural biases still exist, they must be eliminated. The nation's push toward excellence in public education must include all its components--urban, suburban and rural. As mentioned earlier, small schools still exist in large numbers throughout rural America and they will continue to exist in the future. They cannot and should not be twisted into carbon copies of schools in urban America. Their needs are different and they deserve their share of national and state attention. Current improvement efforts must look at the inherent strengths of small rural communities rather than at their deficiencies in terms of an urban system. Efforts must build on the close relationships that exist within the school and between the school and community; their small size must be viewed as an advantage rather than a disadvantage; and their traditional values must be preserved.

Second, policies that encourage consolidation should be reconsidered in view of recent research findings and task force recommendations. The argument often expressed by consolidation advocates was that bigger schools provided more courses and greater opportunities whereas smaller schools could offer only the general basics and placed too much emphasis on student involvement in extracurricular activities. The Nation at Risk calls for strengthened graduation requirements and that, at a minimum, all students seeking a diploma should be required to lay the foundations in the Five New Basics by taking the following curriculum during their four years of high school: (a) four years of English; (b) three years of mathematics; (c) three years of science; (d) three years of social studies; and (e) one-half year of computer science plus two years of foreign language for the college bound. High Schools and the Changing Workplace:

The Employer's View found that the major asset required by employers of high school graduates seeking upwardly mobile careers is the ability to learn and to adapt to changes in the workplace. Technical education, vocational training and curricular providing specific job skills can enhance a student's employ-ability, but cannot substitute for education in the core competencies which are similar to those endorsed by the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth and Project Equality of the College Board. John Goodlad concludes among other things in A Place Called School that smaller schools are better schools because they are more attentive to student needs and progress; all students, whether job oriented or college bound, should receive a general education made up of a core curricula he calls the "five fingers" of human knowledge and organized experience; ban the current practice of "tracking"--(a practice generally found in larger schools rather than smaller ones); and, education needs greater decentralization of authority (an inherent quality found in smaller rural schools). None of these findings or recommendations in my opinion provide a sound argument for further consolidation.

The third issue I raise concerns the financing of small rural schools. School finance reforms have generally failed to address the specific needs of rural and small schools. Natural conditions associated with small size, population sparsity, rural isolation, and rural diversity are often ignored or inappropriately addressed. There has been a failure on the part of researchers to recognize small school differences in their data collection, classification and analysis which has perpetuated the problems in rural education finance. Research results and comparisons are often misused for the purpose of developing new educational policy and for interpreting old policies. State governments have oftentimes tried to develop simple answers to the complex problems of

school finance. The fact that providing services in rural communities is generally more costly than in the cities is a fact of ruralism that government efficiency experts do not like to accept. The fact that smaller rural school districts will have different spending patterns from those of larger urban school districts is yet another fact that is poorly accepted. State school finance laws, if they are to meet the needs of both rural and urban communities, must be flexible enough to allow school districts to develop and support quality educational programs best suited to their local situations and allow for sufficient decentralized budget decision making.

A fourth issue that has stood in the way of rural school improvement efforts concerns the staffing needs in smaller schools. Low salaries have forced many talented teachers and administrators to leave rural education, not always by choice but out of necessity. This rapid turnover in rural school personnel prevents smaller schools from gaining the staff stability that is needed for steady progress toward improvement. In addition to low salaries, rural schools are often used for entry level professional employment and a stepping stone for employment in a larger school district. Many of our teacher training institutions fail to adequately prepare teachers for employment in small rural school districts. Rural school teachers are oftentimes required to be generalists who are capable of teaching in more than one subject area. They must be able to work independently and adapt to the limited resources of most small schools. They must be flexible and able to adjust to the lifestyle in a small rural community To adequately prepare teachers for employment in rural schools, colleges and universities need to give them a rural school teaching experience before they assume full responsibility on the job.

My fifth and final issue concerns the need to build useful partnerships in rural education. Throughout this conference we will have an opportunity to learn about successful "Partnerships in Action." Most address one or more of the issues I have raised. As a member of Iowa's Task Force on Excellence in Education and chairman of the Education and Industry Coordination Subcommittee, I want to throw out a couple of our survey findings for your discussion purposes. When we surveyed business and education leaders throughout the state, we found that generally the attitudes of both are conducive to developing cooperative partnerships. We also found that there are many areas in which businesses are already cooperating with schools. The most popular areas of cooperation are: (1) allowing their employees to serve on school advisory committees, (2) providing work experiences to high school students for career decision making (3) hosting class visits to their facilities, (4) allowing employees to assist teachers in the classroom, and (5) providing awards and scholarships to students.

When school superintendents were asked to indicate any problems that their schools experienced or that they thought may make it difficult for business and education to cooperate in their school district, 65% of the superintendents indicated that there were few, if any, major businesses in their school district and 47% indicated that businesses located in larger neighboring communities were not interested in working with schools outside their local community. Because 70% of Iowa's school districts are located in small rural communities, I see a real need for Iowa's larger businesses located in the urban centers to reach out and offer their cooperative assistance to the smaller rural schools in the state. If only schools located near corporate headquarters will benefit from business and education partnerships, then an even greater inequity of resources for rural schools will result.